

Youth Suicide In Western Australia Involving Cannabis and Other Drugs

The monograph 'Suicide in WA 1986-1998' noted that increased alcohol and drug use frequently occurs in the period before suicide. This report sought to assess the impact of changing patterns of drug use on youth suicide in WA.

Alcohol and illicit drugs identified in the post mortem analysis

- A total of 571 young people aged between 15 and 24 years, died by suicide in the period 1986 to 1998. 30% of these young people had illicit drugs detected in their toxicology analysis.
- Half of the females and almost two thirds of the males recorded positive toxicology results for either alcohol or illicit drugs.

Alcohol use

- Alcohol was the most common drug found in the post-mortem blood results of young people in this study, 44% of males and 36% of females.
- 70% of those with alcohol in their toxicology results had blood alcohol levels above the WA legal driving limit of 0.05.
- Alcohol is often consumed just prior to suicide. This is attributed to a need to disinhibit and overcome the fear of death and other constraints to suicide.

Illicit drug use

- 30% of males and 28% of females tested positive for illicit drugs.
- The illicit substances most commonly detected at post mortem were cannabis (20% males and 11% females), stimulants (9% for both males and females), and opiates (7% of males and 12% of females). This is in line with international studies.
- Positive drug results were highest in the 20-24 year age group for both males and females.
- Young people with a known history of drug use were significantly more likely to have illicit drugs detected at post mortem.

The MCSP research sheets provide a summary of current literature and research.

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All research sheets are available from the MCSP website at www.mcsp.org.au

Aboriginality

- 25% of the 52 young Aboriginal males who completed suicide during the study period had illicit drugs present in their toxicology analysis.
- Fewer Aboriginal males (25%) had illicit drugs detected in their toxicology analysis than non-Aboriginal males (31%).
- Four young Aboriginal females also completed suicide and two of these had a positive toxicology analysis for illicit drugs.

Polydrug involvement

- Where the blood alcohol level reached the point of intoxication there was a significantly increased likelihood that illicit drugs(s) were also present.
- Where drugs were detected at post-mortem they were usually found in combination. 41% of males and 38% of females had two or more drugs present in their toxicology analysis.

Sharon D Hillman, Sven R Silburn, Andria Green & Stephen R Zubrick.

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How often were these drugs the main cause of death?

- Rarely were alcohol or illicit drugs the main cause of death.

Deaths in custody

- There were 14 youth suicides in custody over the study period, with 50% having illicit drugs in their toxicology analysis.
- Only one female death in custody occurred and in this case no illicit drugs were detected.

Summary of Findings/Recommendations

- It is generally accepted that the rise in suicide among young age groups over the past 30 years has been associated with changes in the use of alcohol and other drugs.
- Alcohol and other drug use appears to increase risk of suicide due primarily to the disinhibiting effect of intoxication with increased risk of impulsivity.
- Reducing population prevalence of suicidal behaviour, and other youth risk behaviours associated with harmful levels of substance use, will require greater emphasis on universal and selective levels of prevention.

Other Sources of Information

Alcohol and other Drugs Council of Australia

www.adca.org.au

Australian Bureau of Statistics

www.abs.gov.au

Australian Drug Foundation

www.adf.org.au

Australian Institute of Criminology

www.aic.gov.au/research/drugs/index.html

Department of Health and Ageing

www.health.gov.au/

For state statistics access your state department of health website.

Unemployment

- The majority of young people who were unemployed at the time of their suicide did not have illicit drugs in their toxicology analysis. Females who completed suicide and were unemployed were significantly less likely to have a positive toxicology analysis for illicit drugs.

Geographical Variations

- 32% of young male suicides living in the Perth metropolitan area had illicit drugs detected in the post-mortem toxicology analysis in comparison to 22% of rural males and 29% of remote males.

Psychiatric History

- 25% of males and 41% of females in this study had been diagnosed with a psychiatric illness in the 12 months before their death.
- The percentage of young people with illicit drugs present in their toxicology analysis differed depending on the type of psychiatric disorder.
- 21% males diagnosed with schizophrenic disorder, compared to 33% with a diagnosed depressive disorder, had illicit drugs detected.
- 29% females with a schizophrenic disorder, compared to 47% with a depressive disorder, had illicit drugs detected.

A copy of the full document can be downloaded from the MCSP website at www.mcsp.org.au
Phone 9489 7724 or email mcsp@ichr.uwa.edu.au for a hard copy version.

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